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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Courage and Accountability: Justice-Seeking Conversations in the Class

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*Silence fills the class. No one wants to respond to the question I just raised. From a corner, I hear a student say, "Step it up." She is looking at a white male student who had been quiet the entire class period. With slight hesitation, he apologizes for his silence. He shares that he has been processing feelings of shame around his whiteness. The room is no longer silent. The learning community delves deeper, peeling back layers of shame other students in the class had also been feeling but fearful to share.*

Fear is the greatest enemy to justice-seeking conversations in the classroom. It inhibits dialogue and paralyzes transformative learning. Thus, I invite students to name their fears. They fear:

- saying the wrong thing
- being misunderstood
- losing friends
- crying or exploding with rage in the classroom
- being seen as the "bad" person
- discovering that all they grew up believing is a sham.

Their fears are justified. Justice-seeking conversations can be like a minefield; risk-free zones do not exist. Promising *safe space* would be a lie. Justice-seeking conversations need spaces

where students can enact courage. Creating these spaces is one of my tasks as a professor.

To overcome fear, I invite students on a journey. I tell students that while this course will require intellectual rigor, it will also require emotional rigor. I encourage students to shed false identities and bring their authentic voice into the space. They do not have to perform “wokeness,” nor does ignorance have to invoke shame.

Justice-seeking conversations challenge students at the core. Students aren’t just grappling with social justice concepts theoretically; they wrestle with their very identities. I invite that wrestling in the class. I want the class to be a space where they can explore, discover, challenge, reconstruct, and dream of a better world and their participation in that world together. But each of these actions require courage. I imagine my classroom as a stage, one where students are invited to “try on” these new courageous ways of doing and being socially just.

Crafting learning covenants together is one pedagogical practice I implement in class to invite accountability and inspire courage. The learning covenant establishes how we engage one another. Emphasizing that my class is a learning *community* underscores the importance of relationships. The learning community is not just my responsibility, rather, students co-create the space and then help sustain the space through shared governance. It provides a common language of accountability. The covenant invites ownership and enables me to redistribute power to students in the classroom. I too agree to the covenant. My ultimate goal is to create a relational fabric that is thick enough to withstand the discomfort, offense, and pain that might emerge as a result of justice-seeking conversations.

When my student says “Step It Up” in the opening, she is simply enforcing the learning covenant. Yet, her speaking up and the student’s response both require courage and mutual accountability. The classroom becomes a site where they can *rehearse* justice-seeking conversations in a non-hostile way.

Lines from past course covenants include:

*We won’t ask others to take risks that we are not willing to take.*

*We will show mercy rather than condemn.*

*We won’t settle for fear.*

*We will embrace courage, unity, and humility.*

*We give permission for ourselves to be wrong.*

*This space is not solely for the sake of gaining knowledge.*

*This space is designed to equip.*

*We commit to being agents of change when we leave here.*

It takes time to craft the covenant, but my time investment intends to model the process of consensus-building and affirm the significance of making intentional decisions about how we interact with one another. I remind them that each student will have to agree to these guidelines within the learning community. Once I offer this reminder, I always have a student

that wants to revise something in the covenant. After the covenant is complete, I post it. For the first couple of classes, we read it aloud together. We return to it again and again throughout the course.

The ultimate goal of the covenant is to foster a courageous, inclusive space where students feel valued, respected, and a sense of belonging. Loving well and building reconciling practices does not begin when students leave the classroom; these practices begin within the classroom. When we conclude our class, I encourage students to practice what they learned in other spaces. It is now their task to create courageous spaces among their friends and family.

Amidst the racial pandemic and election, we must prepare for more intense justice-seeking conversations. In what ways might you create space for courage and accountability in your classroom?

<https://wabash.center/2020/07/courage-and-accountability-justice-seeking-conversations-in-the-class/>